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The Soviet Challenge

The men of the Kremlin obviously are sparing no effort to make this a memorable week in the history of the Soviet Union. With tomorrow marking the 40th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, they have already scored a massive propaganda triumph by sending Sputnik I and Sputnik II (with its shaggy little dog) hurtling around the earth in orbits hundreds of miles above us. Nor should anybody be stunned with surprise if in the next few days they do some additional things that are even more spectacular—including, possibly, shooting a rocket to the moon—to demonstrate their scientific, technological and military prowess.

In a short-range sense, of course, it would be a mistake to look upon this prospect as conclusive evidence that the balance of power has shifted decisively in favor of the Kremlin. In all probability, judging from what our highest authorities have said, that is far from the truth of the matter, and it will never become the truth of the matter if the United States and its most advanced allies react to the great new challenge before them by undertaking whatever may be necessary to counter it effectively. Certainly, regardless of what our relative strength may be at the moment, we cannot be negligent in that respect without gravely imperiling ourselves in terms of the not-too-distant future—a future in which the Russians could win a commanding lead over us, a lead that could make them masters of the entire world, if we failed now to go forward with the task that, these times so clearly and urgently require of us.

Perhaps what stands out most of all in the current situation is the need to rid our minds of any lingering doubts about Russia's position as a big-league nation in the field of science and technology. It is a country, unlike ours and other free lands, that can concentrate everything on missile and kindred projects without reference to consumer demands for such things as automobiles, refrigerators or decent housing. More than that, the Kremlin has at its command an immense amount of talent. Hence, as emphasized recently by Dr. Robert Scoville, jr., assistant director of our Central Intelligence Agency, "There is no question that the Soviets are capable of great accomplishments both in peacetime and wartime. In view of the dynamic drive of their entire scientific program, we must expect further revolutionary developments" from them, over and above achievements like the Sputniks.

A similar warning has just been sounded by Lester Pearson, Canada's former Foreign Secretary. As he has put it, "We had better awaken from our illusion of easy technical and material superiority which we have been cherishing because we have a car in every garage, frozen food in every refrigerator and kissproof on every lip." True enough, the West's standard of living, as measured by creature comforts, is tremendously higher than that prevailing behind the Iron Curtain, but that very fact, that softening aspect of our free civilization, can be our undoing unless we make sure that it does not bring on the sort of decadence that could make us scientifically, technologically and militarily inferior to the Soviet Union within a matter of all too few years. For they don't fool around over there; they are not soft; and they ultimately may conquer us if we dissipate our energies on trivia and lose sight of the challenge we face.

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